

STEPMOTHERING: A CHANGING ROLE  
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The stepmother role has changed dramatically over the centuries as society and the institution of the family has changed, yet the image of the "wicked" stepmother remains (Schulman, 1972). The "wicked" stepmothers of the familiar fairy tales were women who replaced mothers whose death left fathers with children to rear alone. Such losses were particularly unsettling to children because fathers were not actively involved in childrearing. Marriage, in western society, was primarily an economic arrangement. Children were a source of unpaid labor and the means used to transfer a father's property and name from one generation to another. Mothers and stepmothers served the interest of society and the family as primary caretakers of young children. In other words, the emphasis in mothering and stepmothering was on instrumental (caretaking) functions.

Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, and, of course, their "wicked" stepmothers are familiar to all of us. Each of these fairy-tale stepchildren fits the popular definition of stepchild--one who fails to receive proper care or attention or is unfairly treated. Each of the stepmothers was indeed wicked. One arranged to have her stepdaughter killed, another banished the stepchildren to the woods rather than face hunger, and the other used her stepdaughter as a servant for her daughters and herself. The fairy tales are told from the child's perspective, and the child represents all that is vulnerable and innocent in humankind (Roosevelt and Loftas, 1976). Each is told in black-and-white terms and is therefore emotionally satisfying; that is, unless one is, or is about to become, a stepmother.

Stepmothers today seldom replace deceased mothers. Most marriages end because of divorce rather than because of death (Bayne, 1979). While children still transfer name and property, they are not seen as economically advantageous. Mothers are still expected to carry out traditional instrumental (caretaking) functions, but the expressive (emotional) functions of mothering are emphasized. In other words, mothers are expected to enjoy their children, and children are seen as a source of satisfaction and joy for parents. Fathers take a more active, if limited, role in parenting. In addition, the numbers of children being reared in stepfamilies have increased dramatically (Visher and Visher, 1979). Given these changes and the persistent myth of the "wicked" stepmother modern day stepmothers find few guides for

stepmothering. They face the challenge of shaping the role of stepmother, while coping with the negative cultural definition of "wicked" stepmother.

The purpose of this research was to explore the present day realities of stepmothering. Some of the specific questions addressed were what satisfactions and strains women experience as they attempt to shape the role of stepmother, and what methods they have developed to become "good" stepmothers.

#### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Major concepts from two theoretical perspectives were used to explore this subject objectively: Family Systems Theory and Role Theory. Taken together these two perspectives suggest general areas of stepmothering that may cause difficulties or give satisfaction. Role Theory, a component of symbolic interactionism, defines any family as a unique system of negotiated roles. How these roles are interpreted and ultimately shaped by an individual is influenced both by interaction and by cultural definitions (Turner, 1970). Role taking refers to the tendency of "conforming to the expectations we perceive others have for our behavior although we are purposely engaged in interactions that clarify and shape those expectations (Aldous, 1974). It is a creative process that has both positive and negative possibilities. This perspective suggests that role taking is characteristic of members of nuclear families, while role making is characteristic of stepfamily members, since roles are vaguely and even negatively defined in our culture.

Family Systems Theory suggests that families are divided into hierarchical subsystems and that, even though a wide variety of patterns are functional, it is crucial that family members address the issue of how family subsystems are organized (Minuchin, 1974; Walsh, 1982). A parental subsystem must be comprised of parents who relate as peers in an executive capacity. The issue for a stepmother becomes defining her role within the parental subsystem in relation to both biological parents of her stepchildren. The reciprocal roles must be mutually gratifying and reinforcing for all members of the parental subsystem for it to function adequately. These theoretical approaches provide an objective perspective that fully acknowledges both positive and negative potentials of role making within the context of the stepfamily and the larger societal environment.

#### METHODS USED

Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches

were used. The primary rationale for using research methods was that it is appropriate and useful to do so given the level of existing knowledge of stepfamily life and the relevance of theoretical perspectives for stepfamily issues. Data was collected systematically on this relatively unknown subject to determine if the selected formal theory was helpful in generating further theory. This approach is described in detail by Glaser and Strauss in their book on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). On the other hand, some quantitative research methods were used because concepts from Role Theory, Family Systems Theory, and a body of impressionistic literature adequately suggest difficulties of stepfamilies.

Three broad categories of stepfamilies are reflected in the existing literature: stepfather families, stepmother families and combination families. For this study, two categories of stepfamilies were defined in which there is a stepmother. The first category is based on the primary residence of the stepchild(ren) and the second category is based on the types of stepparent roles in the stepfamily (See Table 1).

Table 1

Stepmother Family Category by:  
Primary Residence of Stepchildren  
Types of Stepparent Roles (Structure)

Primary Residence of Stepchild(ren)	Number (N=51)	Type(s) of Stepparent Roles (Structure)	Number (N=51)
Part-time stepmother Family (Stepchildren do not reside with stepmother)	25	Stepmother only family (The stepmother is the only spouse with stepchildren)	12
Full-time Stepmother Family (Stepchildren reside with stepmother)	11	Stepmother-ours Family (The stepmother is the only spouse with children, and is also biological mother to at least one child of this marriage)	9
Both full-time, Part-time stepmother family (At least one stepchild resides with stepmother others reside elsewhere)	15	Combination-only Family (Both husband and wife are simultaneously parents by a previous union and stepparents)	24
		Combination-ours family (Both husband and wife are simultaneously parents by a previous union and stepparents, and they have at least one child of this marriage)	6
Total	51	Total	51

The 51 participants had been stepmothers for at least one year and were selected by the snowball sampling method. Each was told that participation was voluntary and that she was free to discontinue at any time during the process. The questionnaire eliciting demographic information and data on the most difficult aspects of stepmothering was presented and briefly explained. The participant was given an opportunity to ask about the questionnaire and was informed that she would have an opportunity to discuss any aspects of stepmothering she wished to discuss during the interview. A standardized semi-structured interview schedule was used. Participants took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and the interview generally lasted one hour.

Soon after each interview, a "preliminary data analysis sheet" was filled out to organize and condense the information. Stepwise multiple regression/correlation analysis was used to analyze the quantitative data collected using the questionnaire.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF STEPMOTHERS AND STEPFAMILIES

Each of the 51 stepmothers was, on the average, 38 years old at the time of the study; 32 years old at the time of marriage into the stepfamily; anglo; married once prior to this marriage; divorced; a single parent for about three years before remarriage; employed full time; a member of a stepfamily that had an income over \$40,000 a year.

The stepfamilies existed because of divorce of both spouses and had existed for about seven years at the time of the interview. Approximately one-half of the 51 families were part-time stepmother families. About one-half were full-time or both full-time and part-time stepmother families. Also, 58.8% (30) were combination families. Of the combination families, 24 were combination-only families and six were combination-ours families. Forty-one percent (21) of the families were stepmother-only or stepmother-ours families. The families included, on the average, four children, two boys and two girls. One was the biological child of the stepmother, two were stepchildren and the remaining was frequently an "ours" child. At the formation of the stepfamily the average age of the participants' stepchildren was 10 years, biological children 11 years.

#### THE "WICKED STEPMOTHER" IMAGE: ITS RELATIONSHIP TO STEPMOTHERS' ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

One unexpected finding was that quite a few stepmothers, twelve addressed the issue of the effect of the "wicked" stepmother image in the interviews. They expressed a high level of awareness of the wicked stepmother image and felt that it had affected their attitudes and behavior.

Three themes emerged in their comments about "wicked" stepmothers. First, the definitions of stepmother are uniformly vivid and distasteful, so distasteful in fact that some respondents refused to apply it to themselves. Second, their definitions of "wicked" stepmothers influenced their feelings about themselves. Third, this negative image, according to their volunteered information, actually affected their behavior towards their stepchild(ren), especially when they first began stepmothering.

None of the 51 participants were asked to define the term stepmother; however, several did so on their own. Among the definitions offered these are representative: "Stepmother means bad or bitch--mother means good"; "Early on, stepmother was a nasty word to me"; "I've never considered myself a stepmother...by that I mean cruel, mean, resentful of a child"; "I won't use the term stepmother--it seems to imply 'mean' or 'less than'; the term is negative"; "The mother role seems natural; the stepmother role is unnatural." Each discussed how this negative term related to how she felt about herself in the role of stepmother. One said, "In the beginning, I told a friend, 'Sometimes these kids drive me crazy.' She said, 'Welcome to motherhood--my kids drive me crazy too!' Then I didn't feel like a wicked stepmother."

Relating the "wicked" stepmother term to themselves affected several stepmothers' behaviors toward their stepchildren. They reported that early attempts to disprove that they were wicked stepmothers led them to attempt to create a fantasy world of fun and games for stepchildren; hold in resentments toward stepchildren; act as if they favored stepchildren over biological children. One woman illustrates what a powerful influence the wicked stepmother image can have:

I bent over backwards to prove this myth false when we first married. I bought into thinking I was wicked. It had me thinking I'd be thought of as wicked by the stepchildren and their mother too!

Finally I decided my actions toward them were not based on my being wicked. Now I act on what I really think is right [in terms of discipline] rather than on what they might think of me. I do this by using my own mother as a model of discipline. The fact that my

husband supports my actions 100% certainly helps!

In sum, these insights, while having no quantitative merit, support the assumption of clinical and popular literature that the image of the "wicked" stepmother in contrast to the "good" mother is known to stepmothers and negatively influences their perceptions of themselves and their behavior.

#### DIFFICULT ASPECTS AND COPING STRATEGIES

Stepmothers picked the following as the most difficult aspects of stepmothering listed on the questionnaire:

1. Relating to the biological mothers of their stepchildren
2. Being a stepmother without being a biological mother
3. Handling unacceptable feelings toward stepchildren
4. Handling with one's husband discipline of stepchildren and biological children from a previous marriage

They developed numerous strategies to cope with these difficulties. The following discussion is an elaboration of both difficulties and successful strategies they developed.

#### Relating to Biological Mothers

This aspect of stepmothering was picked most often as either the most difficult or second most difficult. Each of the women who chose this item discussed it at some length. A very small number appeared to have little sympathy with their stepchildren's biological mother. They cited intrusive, undercutting behavior, spurred by the biological mother's hostility toward her exhusband, as the source of poor relations. Others frequently described themselves as being in the role of caring for children who ironically felt loyalty to a biological mother who gave them up or even, in some cases, abused them.

Frustration over having to care for stepchild(ren) who have loyalty toward and a bond with their biological mother while simultaneously having little power to change the situation prompted one respondent to say, "There is a bond between them [stepchildren and their biological mother] I can't tear apart. I would like to, but I won't try; it would end up hurting me." Some of the stepmothers who indicated that relating to the biological mother was quite difficult did express some understanding of the biological mother's feelings or situations. For instance

one remarked, "She seems afraid I will take over her mother role."

Given the intense feelings and the sense of powerlessness expressed by these stepmothers, it is not surprising that they developed a variety of coping strategies. These successful coping strategies emerged:

1. Encourage a positive relationship between the stepchildren and their biological mother. Never talk negatively about the stepchildren's mother to them, and include her in important events, such as weddings and graduations.
2. Encourage the biological father to deal with the biological mother regarding the children, unless she indicates she wishes to relate to you.
3. Ventilate negative feelings regarding the biological mother to a neutral party or to your husband.
4. Work to maintain a polite, superficial relationship with the biological mother if she is willing. Do this by backing away from discussing emotionally charged issues such as amount of child support and by following her lead on child-rearing practices.

In sum, it appears that the participants began stepmotherhood unsure how to relate to the biological mothers of their stepchildren and lacking support from the biological mothers in their attempts to perform caretaking (instrumental) functions for the children; sensed an imbalance of power between themselves and the biological mothers; found it difficult to have positive feelings or sympathy for women from whom they felt lack of support or hostility; held negative feelings toward those biological mothers who either gave up their children voluntarily or who rarely visited them. Stepmothers who felt successful after a time acknowledged their limited power in relationship to the biological mothers, thus eventually becoming more powerful as stepmothers. They had to turn to others to express feelings and vent frustrations that were inherent in being in a relatively powerless, negatively defined role.

#### Being a Stepmother without a Biological Mother

Twelve stepmothers out of 51 included in this study had stepchildren and had no biological children from this marriage or a previous marriage. Three of these twelve chose the item "Being a stepmother without ever having been a biological mother" as either the most difficult or the second most difficult aspect of stepmothering. Being a stepmother without being a biological mother seems to be difficult primarily for two reasons. First, stepmothers in this group were unsure how to define the stepmother role, more unsure than stepmothers who had biological

children. Second, empathizing with one's husband's feelings toward his children was extremely difficult.

These women developed the following strategies:

1. Acknowledge and accept your feelings toward being a stepmother through professional counseling or discussion with friends who are stepparents.
2. Seek support, guidance, and reality checks from other stepparents and biological parents. This can be done with individual friends or more formal support groups.
3. Read material on child development and on stepfamilies.

#### Handling Feelings toward Stepchildren

A total of 12 women indicated that they had feelings toward their stepchildren which they had difficulty accepting. Seven of the twelve indicated this by choosing the item, "Having different feelings toward your stepchildren than your biological children." Four indicated it by choosing the item: "Feeling guilty or bad because you do not love your stepchildren." One indicated difficulty by picking both items. Each of them had expectations of themselves in the stepmother role that they did not fulfill.

Combining responses to the two items presents a picture of stepmothers who do not feel toward their stepchildren as they perceive they should feel. Interestingly, all 12 of these stepmothers have biological or adopted children as well as stepchildren. This suggests the possibility that having experienced motherly feelings predisposes one to expect to have those same feelings for step-children. Ten of these 12 women were full-time stepmothers; therefore, one can speculate it is easier for part-time stepmothers to accept differential feelings for stepchildren than it is for full-time stepmothers. In other words, stepmothers have different expectations of themselves in relation to part-time and full-time stepchildren. Realistically part-time stepchildren with actively involved biological mothers may not need to be loved by stepmothers while full-time stepchildren with less involved biological mothers may need more love from stepmothers. At the very least, full-time stepchildren demand more involvement from the stepmothers in instrumental functions than do part-time stepchildren. While there is more potential for conflict, there is more potential for close, loving relationships between stepmothers and full-time stepchildren. These twelve respondents developed the following successful coping strategies:



1. First, acknowledge unacceptable feelings toward stepchildren, including differential feelings or lack of love, in order to begin accepting those feelings. Individual therapy, family therapy, support groups, and discussion with other stepparents helped them to acknowledge and begin to accept feelings.

2. Think and talk through feelings toward stepchildren before taking on the role of disciplinarian in order to treat them fairly.

3. Openly discuss feelings toward stepchildren with their biological father. Most of the stepmothers who did this stated their husbands expressed similar feelings toward their stepchildren.

4. Initially, minimize the disciplinary aspect of parenting with stepchildren as much as possible. Ways to do this include encouraging the husband to parent the stepchildren, hiring a maid to minimize chores, and generally having as few rules as possible.

#### Disciplining Biological Children and Stepchildren

Fifteen stepmothers chose one of 3 items related to discipline as difficult. These are deciding with their husbands how to discipline their biological children from a previous marriage; deciding how with their husbands how to discipline their stepchildren; and maintaining with their husbands fair treatment of stepchildren and biological children. Interestingly, not one stepmother picked the item, "Deciding with husband how to discipline children of this marriage." Yet 15 stepmothers in the study have children from the current marriage. The difficulties in discipline seem to arise when dealing with her children and his children rather than our children.

These particular stepmothers came up with these successful strategies:

1. Take the responsibility to initiate discussions on how discipline will be handled with all children in the family.

2. Work to support one another in the style of child rearing agreed upon. For some families this meant that each biological parent essentially parented his/her own children with support from the other. For other families, this meant sharing parenting for all children. The parental subsystems and roles perceived as functional by the participants varied considerably. The key was explicit restructuring of parental subsystems that were inclusive of all parental figures on some mutually acceptable level.

3. Participate in workshops, family therapy, discussion groups to learn how to co-parent with one's marriage partner.

## SATISFYING ASPECTS OF STEPMOTHERING

No empirical research and little popular literature deals explicitly with the satisfactions of stepmothering, so this topic was explored to gain a more balanced view of stepfamily life. Stepmothers were simply asked, "Has there been anything satisfying about being a stepmother for you?" Most of the women responded with animation and shared vivid stories about their stepfamilies. While all acknowledged that assuming the role of stepmother was difficult, a majority, 72%, described the role as primarily satisfying rather than primarily negative. In order to present the approximately 80 satisfactions reported, they were grouped into five categories. The categories that emerged were:

1. Experiencing the Rewards of Mothering
2. Development of Family Relationships
3. Evolution of a Family Unit
4. Acquiring a Larger Family
5. Having Less Responsibility

### Rewards of Mothering

The first category includes satisfactions described as essentially the same as those experienced by biological or adoptive mothers. Forty stepmothers gave such responses. One stepmother summed up the comments in this category:

Stepparenting is not so different from parenting in terms of the relationship to the kids but in terms of outside factors. The satisfactions are really the same as being a parent . . . #it is most satisfying when the kids [stepchildren] appreciate me and when I see I have a positive influence on their lives.

In contrast to the first category, the other four categories emphasize the differences between the satisfactions of stepmothering and mothering.

### Family Relationships

Twenty-four stepmothers interviewed specifically mentioned the development of stepfamily relationships other than their own relationship to a stepchild as particularly satisfying to them. Seven commented on the husband-wife relationships, ten on stepsibling and half-sibling relationships, and seven on the father-child or father-stepchild relationship.

### Evolution of a Family Unit

Nine stepmothers specifically stated that family unity was not present at the formation of their stepfamilies.

Unity took time and effort to develop. It was appreciated by each of these women, not taken for granted. All had been married at least three years for an average of six years. Some were part-time stepmothers and others were full-time stepmothers and one had had an "ours" child. They had taken on stepchildren from pre-school through adulthood. To quote one: "It has been a pleasure watching the developing family, seeing the children build relationships becoming one unit."

#### Acquiring a Larger Family

Eight stepmothers out of the 51 interviewed stated, in various ways, that a primary satisfaction for them was to have children in their families they would not have otherwise. For six of these women this meant that stepmotherhood gave them additional children; for two of them it meant they had acquired the only children in their families through remarriage.

#### Limited Responsibility

Six part-time stepmothers, out of a total of 18 who expressed some satisfactions in stepmothering, liked the part-time status with their stepchildren because they could enjoy them without having total responsibility. Three of these five had "ours" children from the current marriage. None of the five had biological children from a previous marriage. Two had no biological children at all.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This research suggests that women need help in successfully making the role of stepmother and that they acknowledge this need. For each area of difficulty the participants identified, they pointed out that some type of therapy was helpful to them in learning to cope. They utilized support groups, individual and family counselors, and child rearing seminars/workshops. They needed help in acknowledging and accepting feelings, negotiating roles, disciplining fairly. At the same time, they developed strategies that could provide useful guidelines to other stepmothers and helping professionals. For example, they found that acknowledging the bond between children and biological mothers (even absent ones), by never talking negatively about the biological mother, necessary for eventual successful stepmothering. The very difficulties they identified--relating to biological mothers; being a stepmother without being a biological mother; handling unacceptable feelings toward stepchildren; and handling discipline of stepchildren and one's own children with a husband--could prove useful to helping professionals. It alerts them to potential areas of difficulty that can be addressed with preventive measures such as stepparent

education groups or premarital counseling for remarrying couples.

Insights shared as to the satisfactions of stepmothering could assist other stepmothers and helping professionals in viewing stepmothering more realistically rather than simply negatively. Exposure to a realistic image of the stepmother role could positively affect stepmothers' feelings about themselves and in turn their behavior toward their stepchildren. The fact that most of the participants described stepmothering as primarily satisfying should give hope to women who are having difficulty in making this role. Professionals aware of potential satisfactions could share them with clients having initial difficulties. An alternative strategy would be to organize support groups of stepmothers to share satisfactions, difficulties and coping strategies.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This exploratory research utilizing a non-clinical sample, as stated previously, identified areas of particular difficulty for women attempting to make the role of stepmother. It might be useful to replicate this portion of the study based on a large random sample since the research was conducted with such a small sample utilizing the snowball sampling method. Also, five general areas of satisfactions for stepmothers were identified. The fact that the participants indicated that initial problems were often eventually resolved through negotiation and redefinition of roles clearly suggests that stepfamily dynamics normally change over time. Cohesion developed slowly and as a result of considerable effort. Thus, further research on stepmother families should explicitly focus on stepfamily dynamics at different stages of stepfamily life. Further, while this study provides some insight into the positives associated with stepfamily life it is only a beginning. A continued focus on the positives as well as the stresses of stepfamily life, from an objective perspective, would likely result in additional useful information about this little-known area of family life.

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